

Mendocino Headlands State Park



Our Mission

The mission of the California Department of Parks and Recreation is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.

ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER
Governor

MIKE CHRISMAN
Secretary for Resources

RUTH COLEMAN
Acting Director, California State Parks



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Mendocino Headlands

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Mendocino, CA 95460
(707) 937-5804



*Roaring sea caves,
a pygmy forest found
nowhere else on earth,
ocean views from
Victorian windows—
welcome to
Mendocino area
state parks.*



On the Mendocino coast, the air has a distinct fragrance of salt, and the crashing waves create a continuous resonance. The tall bluffs at this spot north of San Francisco resemble the rugged shores of the east coast, but with an unmistakable California flair.

Victorian-era communities that overlook the sea reflect the New England roots of their builders who, in the ordinary course of life, added volumes to California's colorful history.

MENDOCINO AREA STATE PARKS

Two miles north of Mendocino, Russian Gulch State Park's collapsed sea cave cuts 200 feet into the headlands to form the boiling surge known as the Devil's Punchbowl. Mendocino is embraced on three sides by unmatched views of Mendocino Headlands State Park. Van Damme State Park, beginning at the mouth of the Little River, has a protected cove for divers, a fern canyon for hikers, and a unique forest of Mendocino pygmy cypress.

The climate here is temperate year-round. Winter rains and cool summer fogs that

usually burn off by mid-morning provide the moisture necessary for the thriving coastal redwoods. Prepare for changeable weather by dressing in light layers.

MENDOCINO AREA HISTORY

Native Americans

The Pomo date back about 3,000 years on the North Coast. Their main village of redwood bark houses was located at the mouth of the Big River. It is believed that when Russian and Aleutian fur trappers arrived here in the early 1800s, it was the Pomo's first contact with non-natives. The Pomo passed through on annual food gathering visits, but eventually settled year-round. They hunted large and small game, caught fish and shellfish, and gathered seaweed, acorns and various seeds. Whatever they could not obtain locally they acquired in trade with other groups; in times of plenty the groups often gathered to share the bounty.

When the Pomo were drawn into the mission system in the early 1800s, their way of life was forever altered. Within a generation or two, direct conflict and exposure to European diseases nearly decimated them. Today about 5,000 Pomo descendants, who still occupy parts of their ancestral lands, gather the raw materials to make some of the world's finest Native American baskets and to pass on this ancient skill to the next generation of artisans.

European and American Settlers

Settled by emigrants from all over the world, this area has a long history of entrepreneurial exploitation. In 1812 a ship owned by the

Russian-American Company entered a cove beneath the bluffs of what would become North America's southernmost Russian settlement, Fort Ross. In the 1830s the American and Hudson's Bay trappers passed through seeking beaver pelts. The Russian colony was a commercial failure, and in 1841 they sold out and left. The Fort Ross property had various owners, including John Sutter, and in 1906 the fort and some acreage were acquired by the State for restoration, reconstruction and interpretation of this era.

The Lumber Mills

In 1850 the *Frolic* sank off Point Cabrillo with its San Francisco-bound cargo. Salvagers were unsuccessful, but their disappointment was appeased by the nearby stands of redwoods. Within two years they had built a sawmill at the mouth of the Big River.

In 1864 Little River was founded as a mill town to supply lumber to build San Francisco. However, heavy logging diminished the local timber resources, and by 1893 the Little River Mill closed down. With the loss of the mill, businesses, services, and even the school were abandoned.



In the Russian Gulch area, the lumber trade consisted of several small mills that only operated for a short time. The area eventually became “logged over,” but the pier was used for passengers and freight into the next century.

MENDOCINO HEADLANDS STATE PARK

This 347-acre green belt, on the headlands between Highway One and the Pacific Ocean, surrounds the town of Mendocino. Sheer bluffs rising from a rocky shoreline form the park’s southern section. The historic Ford House Visitor Center (built in 1854) sits on the south side of Mendocino’s Main Street. Most of the shops on the town’s picturesque main street have excellent ocean views.

Park History

Mendocino was the first of several north coast towns founded between 1851 and 1920—the height of the lumber industry. German immigrant William Kasten was bound for the gold country in 1850 when his ship “fortuitously” ran aground off the coast. In 1851 he filed papers claiming land he called Port of Good Hope.

The next year San Francisco engineer Harry Meiggs built the sawmill at Big River. By the early 1900s, Big River had become an important lumber town. The State acquired a portion of the headlands in 1957, and in 1974, through the support and advocacy of the local residents, the land around the town became Mendocino Headlands State Park.

Those who built Mendocino’s Victorian buildings found their fortunes in the magnificent stands of coast redwoods. In 1854 Jerome B. Ford, superintendent of the first sawmill in Mendocino and founder of the town, built a home overlooking the Pacific for his bride. Today the Ford House Visitor



The Ford House

Center exhibits tools, a scale model of 1890 Mendocino, Native American artifacts, and photographic images that interpret the town’s history. While Mendocino is known today for art galleries, shops and inns, its well-tended Victorian architecture still conjures up a time when transportation was literally horse-power, and each home came equipped with a water tower and an out-house.

RECREATION

Visitors can enjoy fern canyons, miles of trails, horse camping, a 36-foot waterfall, scuba diving, bluff-top picnicking, camping and a bicycle trail, among many choices.

Camping—Russian Gulch and Van Damme State Parks have campgrounds—reservations are highly recommended from spring through fall. Call (800) 444-7275.

Diving and Fishing—Russian Gulch’s rocky ledges attract abalone divers. The well-protected dive site at Van Damme has shallow areas and offers beginners gradual entry from the shore. Abalone divers need a valid California fishing license and punch card. **NOTE:** The beauty of the Mendocino coast is tempered by its unpredictability and danger. Dive only in designated areas, and never turn your back on the ocean.

Kayaking and Canoeing—The Big River has an outlet to the sea, sea caves, and a great view of historic Mendocino. At Van Damme tide pools and sea caves provide adventure, while at Russian Gulch canoes and kayaks take you from the cove’s calm waters into the ocean.

Interpretive Activities—Summer interpretive activities include staff-led hikes, campfire programs and junior ranger programs. Times and locations are posted in each park.








Mendocino Headlands

State Park



Legend

-  Paved road
-  Trail
-  Accessible Feature
-  Parking
-  Restrooms



PLEASE REMEMBER

- The water is bitterly cold, swift and unforgiving. Even on calm days, waves can overcome people standing at the water's edge or on rocks, and carry them out to sea.
- All features of the parks are protected by state law and may not be disturbed or collected.
- Anglers over the age of 16 must have a valid fishing license in their possession.
- Do not gather firewood or bring your own—most campgrounds have firewood for sale.
- Pets are welcome at most state parks, but must be kept on a leash no longer than six feet. In campgrounds they must be kept in a vehicle or in your tent at night.
- Driving off designated roads is not permitted
- State law requires that all bicycle riders under the age of 18 wear bicycle helmets.

This park is supported in part through a nonprofit organization. For more information contact:

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